

Queer, Caste and Identity: Contemplating Sexuality and Subalternity in Hansda S. Shekhar's *My Father's Garden*

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Abstract

Divided into three sections “Lover”, “Friend” and “Father”, Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's novel, *My Father's Garden* (2018), traverses through caste system, politics and most specifically sexuality and its multiple orientations. Set in Jharkhand, all three sections [especially the first two] introduce us to different contours of masculinities, and their accompanying desires and alienations. Observation of sexuality in Shekhar's works is nothing new but what is exclusive is his depiction of homosexuality or its “queer” trajectories in a marginalized, third world, tribal society. This paper seeks to examine the nuances of sexual identity, issues of queer representation, subaltern selves and complexities of caste recognition in rural queer India. Through the characters' [like Samir, BadaBabu and the narrator himself] view, this paper also tries to explore, locate and understand the queer selves. Taking philosophical supports from the works of Spivak, Mary Mackintosh, Foucault and Judith Butler, this paper simultaneously brings out the issues like marginality, the social construction of sexuality, discourses of sexuality and gender performativity.

Keywords- Subaltern, Gender-queer, Santhal Tribe, Homosexuality, Caste

Introduction

Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar is a doctor and famously known for his collection of short stories, *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* (2015), which was shortlisted for The Hindu Prize; a novel, *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupī Baskey* (2014), which won the Sahitya Academy Yuva Puraskar; and a novella for children, *Kumar Jwala and the Gift of Fire: Adventures in Champakbagh* (2018), which was shortlisted for the Crossword Book Award. He has also translated pieces of literature from Santhali and Hindi into English.

In the earlier works like *The Adivasi Will Not Dance*, Shekhar has been bold enough to touch upon the taboo issues or taboo subjects, which a few novelists, regional or otherwise had dared to do so. Gendered marginalization, sexual abuse, political subjugation of tribals, communal tensions, prostitution even alternate sexual preferences like homosexuality or gay relationship are the themes in Shekhar's prose.

Shekhar's *My Father's Garden* is divided into three sections- "Lover", "Friend" and "Father". The novel presents a bildungsroman and traverses through the development of an anonymous narrator cum medical student and doctor in Jharkhand. Written in the first-person narrative, the vividly described setting of the novel, the types of true-to-life characters, the order of the storyline, anecdotes, objective and subjective details and the subtleties of relationships as depicted in the text seek curious and special scrutiny of the novel which portrays the similarities of the life details, achievements and ups-and-downs of the author.

The themes or the plots of Shekhar's writings are taken from the everyday lives of rural tribal people- especially the Santhal tribe of Jharkhand and neighbouring states of West Bengal and Odisha. This study specially deals with the first two sections of the novel- "Lover" and "Friend" where the issues of homosexuality and subalternity are vividly portrayed. In the first section, Shekhar depicts the life of the unnamed male narrator who is a medical student and makes love with his classmates and junior. First, in his first year as a medical student, he falls in love with Sunil Besra, his "classmate and a couple of months older" (Shekhar, 14) than he. After a disastrous break-up with Sunil, he manages to be in love with Lucky who was also his classmate. In the narrator's words, "I was walking through my Corex haze, expecting Sunil to jump out of a corner and surprise me when I fell in love with Lucky, another of my classmates". (21)

This is how the story begins and acquires a flow through the complexities of homosexual or gay sexual preferences and the struggles of belonging to the society that they live in. A man or a woman has one of the four kinds of weaknesses towards each other: sexual, political (i.e., lust for power), financial and above all, the desire to be admired. To say the least, a character could be explained in terms of lust for sex, lust for power, lust for wealth and desire to be adored. Gender Studies and Queer Theory only explain a character in terms of his/her lust for the opposite sex or even, for the same sex. This paper, for the first time, introduces Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's novel as a text that deals with same-sex or homosexual relationships- the relationship of the unnamed narrator with Sunil, Lucky and Samir.

Invert Relationship:

'Homosexuality' has been commonly used across cultures in the world through the term was first introduced in a letter by a German Doctor named Karl Maria Kertbeny in 1869. The terms 'gay' and 'lesbian' came to the lexicon as the later development of the sexuality or sexual orientations and behaviour of same-sex relationships. But it has never been accepted in any society of the world of that time even though there are signs of such practice that doesn't exclude India. Sherry Joseph, a researcher, through his study, attempted to understand the Indian Lesbian and Gay movement through the wider and deeper perspectives of identity politics. In an era when the subjugation and marginalization of gay people and lesbians were at its extreme level, the homosexual immigrants basically from the Indian subcontinent claimed in France, Britain, America and many other parts of the world to arrange an agenda in the middle of a racist circumstance which was different from the agenda imposed, regulated and controlled by the white homosexuals.

Likewise, the present story deals with the portrayal of such characters that chose altered sexual identities or inverted sexualities. Samir, Sunil, Lucky and the author himself affirms the sexual attractions they nurture for. Queer identity always struggles for its co-existence in the society with the heteronormative society. Voicing unappeasable resentment against 'straight' people's abhorrence for the sexual non-conformists, the government's inaction in thwarting the AIDS epidemic, and unspeakable social harassment of gay people, this anonymous leaflet declared that nothing short of an aggressive revolution could set them free:

Until I can enjoy the same freedom of movement and sexuality, as straights, their privilege must stop and it must be given over to me and my queer sisters and brothers. Straight people will not do it voluntarily and so they must be forced into it. Straight must be frightened into it, terrorized into it. Fear is the most powerful motivation. No one will give us what we deserve. Rights are not given they are taken, by force if necessary. (Anon. 1)

The invert relationships or here the male-male relationship that the characters nurture is the prime topic to discuss. A gay person is not necessarily a man who has sex with another man. A man could be gay if he has a lifelong attraction to other men. Homosexuality is also a matter of choice- it is an anti-patriarchal choice. Sexual orientation is invisible, while gender is visible. This homosexuality is visible in many parts of the novel; sometimes in the characters' speech and sometimes in their psyche. The invert role of the sex is sometimes so powerful that when the protagonist approaches Samir for a sexual favour for the first time, Samir reacted as "No, no boss. Not Right, we are both ladka [boys]" (29).

The language in the text in many places is gendered and politicized through the gender superior-inferior binary. It is not free from the ill effects of the patriarchal dominating language system. Though Sunil, Lucky, Samir and the narrator himself have the right to enjoy equal sexuality, the anonymous narrator always presents himself as the female partner.

Gendered Experience:

There are fundamental or basic differences between 'gender' and 'sex'. The differences between 'gender' and 'sex' have been brought out by Andrew Edgar and Peter Sedgwick in their book titled *Key Concepts in Cultural Theory* (2004),

The concept of 'gender' is typically placed in opposition to the concept of 'sex'. While our sex (female/male) is a matter of biology, our gender (feminine/masculine) is a matter of culture. Gender may therefore be taken to refer to learned patterns of behaviour and action, as opposed to that which is biologically determined. (158)

Within the field of gender studies, there are two other forms of criticism: gay and lesbian criticism of which the latter is not our matter concern. As gender studies give rise to gay and lesbian criticism, Queer theory talks of the study of gay-lesbian and bisexual experience. Queer theory is interdisciplinary and "may therefore be seen to explore the process through which sexual identity is, and has been constituted in contemporary and post societies" (2004, p.321).

If this social construct actually defines the gender or masculinity and femininity, the characters presented in the novel portray the masculine/feminine binary. The characters do not alter their position in course of time rather they stick to their roles as masculine and feminine. The anonymous narrator cum protagonist always poses for the role of femininity while his lovers Sunil, Lucky and Samir always establish themselves as masculine selves. This argument stands clear when the narrator says, “He [Sunil] was quite sure that he’d be the man in this. It didn’t matter to me, I was happy” (17). This gendered identity once again proves the narrator to be feminine and turns Samir as masculine when Samir was asked by the narrator to marry him, ‘Marry me’, I said, ‘and I’ll live with you.’ ‘Only if you were really a woman’, he said tenderly, as if I meant it. (51)

Shackles of Caste:

The novel is also embedded with the patches of casteist comments and ill effects of caste-based subjugation of the characters. Alongside, the psyche of the narrator is also not free from the consciousness of his own caste identity. In many places of the novel, the narrator separates and identifies himself to the readers as an Adivasi [tribal man] and in many places, he distinguishes his loved ones through their caste-based identities. After falling in love with Sunil, the narrator remarks, “...he is a Mahato, from a different ‘phylum. I am an Adivasi. And if having an ‘intimate’ Mahato friend were not bad enough, I also letting him screw me” (11-12). After a while he again confirms himself as privileged with reservation through quota while getting admission to medical college: “...all I could understand was that I had been accepted into the medical college on a quota” (13).

Thus the casteist viewpoint of the society and the resultant subjugation projects the text as a subaltern text and the characters as subalterns. The characters here try to break through the shackles of the caste system but ultimately end up being victimized in that maze. They are not directly affected by the caste system; rather their psyche is a bend in that manner which is affected accordingly.

Trauma and Social Pressure:

Shekhar never allows, doesn’t want to actually, let his characters live in a Utopian world of comfort or warmth. From the very beginning of the novel, it becomes obvious that the characters like Sunil, Lucky, Samir and the narrator himself share a disturbed and difficult

relationship; with the outside world and even with themselves too. Shekhar's themes are from traditional, custom-rich Indian society and its presentation is to influence the 'gay' people and on anyone who is opposed to heterosexuality as defined by society. The novel is a true to life picture of society concerning how does it sway one's behaviour when one is refused any self-expression and hypocrisy is sustained for the sake of custom or tradition. This ends up victimizing the character against the presumptions and expectations of society.

The trauma of being homosexual in nature that undergoes the psyche of the characters is most visible throughout the text. The taboo and resultant trauma that ends up victimizing the characters seeks special mention. This fear of rejection of their sexual preferences is something that pushes the narrator to attempt suicide after being detached from Samir for several years. He states,

I got a posting in a hospital in Pakur and moved there. I tried to keep in touch with Samir but he remained elusive. I stalked him on Facebook, saw him making friends, sent him messages, and then, one day, he blocked me. I gave up, and for several years, we did not speak at all... It grew and grew and became unbearable until, one evening, I snapped under the weight of that monstrous hope. There were a lot of things going on in my mind and I was feeling so defeated I ran a knife over my wrist. (55-56)

Another example of fear resulting from social construct bears a heartrending testimony. In a homophobic society like rural or semi-urban India, the acknowledgement or acceptance of the 'other' sexual preferences is something that increases the hurdles for the gay and lesbian peoples. Something like this happens when the anonymous narrator cum protagonist faces his inability to tell his parents about his sexual choices. The pain of the character comes to light when he says, As I made my way back to Pakur, I found myself crying on the train. I was tortured by my inability to tell my parents about my choices, by the thought of the pain and disappointment I would cause them if I spoke the truth, by my inability to accept what I did not want to accept. All of it, everything that I felt and was yet to feel, was flowing out of my eyes. I must have known a storm was coming because I had worn dark glasses that morning. And I took care to see that my face did not contort. I made no sound. (59-60)

The trauma finally leads the characters to experience a restriction, a social construct or social pressure. The pressure that holds them back from fulfilling their desires, from achieving

their goals and from living a life of free will is rightly conveyed by the author through the perspectives of the narrator when he says: “Men are hard to find, and he [Samir] was one to die for” (9). Though Samir and the narrator were carrying on a sexual relationship, it was not accepted in the society which made Samir state: “I have an image to maintain” (45). While carrying on such a relationship, the narrator knew that his relationship would never be accepted by his parents: “I knew that in a deeply fundamental way, I would never be the son he wanted” (14).

Confronting Sexuality and Subalternity:

As might be expected, homosexuals have standardly been pictured as ‘other’ and have served to define and confirm the heterosexuality of the centre. Heterosexuality has been considered as the ‘normal’ sexual preference while homosexuality has been so far seen as something ‘abnormal’ or alien to the human civilization instead of its presence from the beginning of civilization. On the other hand ‘subaltern’ means the colonized/ oppressed subject whose voice has been silenced. The term has relevance to the study of Third World countries, especially India.

Now, these two major theoretical ideas are being intersected in this text when the subaltern characters like Samir, Lucky, Sunil and even the anonymous narrator himself bears the characteristic features of homosexuality. They are subalterns not only in terms of their social backwardness; rather they are subalterns in terms of their subjugation and marginalization due to their ‘inferior’ sexual preferences. They all belong to certain backward communities, certain underdeveloped tribal areas; still, they share common features of homosexuality. Their voice is also unheard like that of the ‘subalterns’ when they attempt to convey their plight of being rejected by society as sexual outcasts. The gay characters or the homosexuals of this text put forward a deliberate and positive attempt to establish their preferences but ultimately fail to even convey their choices to their parents only. It shows that there is no space from where the subaltern subject can speak.

Conclusion

The ‘abnormal’, queer characters representing the gays or the homosexuals of rural, semi-urban and urban middle-class India experience a tortuous journey of marginalization, isolation and victimization due to homophobic society and social prohibition of these people. Shekhar has

been true to his calling as a novelist to show their distressing situation in present India, yet how the issue gets away the intellectuals or the thinking people to be considered for an acknowledgement and a right place in the society. The novelist has attained the heart of everyone by pointing out this cause of the ailment, the whole truth of it, with all integrity, sincerity and truthfulness of purpose. Alongside, the novel perfectly brings out the signs of subjugation on the basis of caste and on the basis of 'inferior' sexual preferences. The otherness of the characters due to their homosexual identity makes them subalterns with no voice to express sexual preferences. This is not a book that at first read provides hope for a better society. And yet, as you go over the lines that ache with sadness, that pack immense details about whole cultures and traditions in a few lines, it is impossible not to feel glad that Shekhar is writing prose that is necessary. Those specifics of struggle might be local but the pain is universal.

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